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TRANSLATING TO MUSIC

By SIGMUND SPAETH

ANY ONE who has ever devoted much time to translating songs, operas or cantatas into English must frequently be annoyed by such a remark as "How wonderful it is to be a linguist!" As a matter of fact, being a linguist is the least important qualification for the delicate task of translating to music. With the aid of cosmopolitan friends, dictionaries, or even hack-translators, a literal version of any prose or verse is not difficult to obtain. It is the poetical insight, the understanding of the intentions of both the composer and the author of the text, and the ability to imitate the salient features of the original combination that must determine the skill of the musical translator.

In the midst of the still raging controversy concerning "opera in English," the question has been asked again and again, "Why translate at all?" There can be only one answer. The translation of words set to music is permissible in so far as it has an educational value. If a song or an opera can broaden its sphere of influence through an English version, then by all means let it be translated. Better the half-knowledge that comes from even a weak imitation than complete ignorance.

American music-publishers, recognizing this need, have generally made it a rule to supply all foreign works with singable English equivalents, not with the intention of encouraging the use of translations, but that every composition may have a fair chance to deliver its message. The amateur who has not yet mastered the pronunciation of a foreign language may still acquire a certain appreciation of a masterpiece through an adequate translation, and thus be tempted to seek out the less accessible beauties of the original.

From the educational point of view, therefore, English versions of vocal music are desirable. Why cannot the hysterical propagandists of "opera in English" be satisfied with this verdict instead of insisting upon their artistic value as well?

A well-known lecturer, speaking from the stage of the Century Opera House in New York, recently compared grand opera with a beautiful picture, veiled, however, by the unfamiliar language in

which it was presented. "Why not remove this veil of language," said the ardent enthusiast, "so that all the beauties of line and color may become clearly visible?"

The utter absurdity of this analogy scarcely requires comment. If an opera is to be compared with a picture, then surely the language in which it is written represents not an external covering but the very lines and colors of which the picture is composed. Carrying out the analogy to its logical conclusion, the English version would have the same relation to the original opera that a photograph or a lithograph would have to an original painting. Nobody denies the educational value of the photograph or the lithograph, but who would argue that it was the same thing as the original, and who would look at it if the original itself could be seen? (It is assumed that the translation is at least a fair copy, not, as is unfortunately so often the case, a ridiculous caricature.)

To argue that the English version of any vocal work is equal to the original is a mere waste of time. Such a contention implies that the setting fits at least two sets of words equally well, which at once eliminates it as a true work of art. (This statement does not attempt to undervalue the melodic beauty of such tunes as those of the old folk-songs, which have been fitted with widely differing sets of words. It merely contends that no setting of this kind may truly be called a work of art, as it is entirely lacking in the quality of "inevitableness." A fine melody is not necessarily an artistic setting.)

There is a vast difference between setting music to English words and adapting an English translation to music already fitted to the words of another language. The discussion of English as a fit medium for song really has nothing to do with the question. Even supposing that English were a more singable language than Italian or French or German (which, especially in the case of the first two, would be extremely difficult to prove) the translation and consequent changing of a work of art would not on that account be excusable. For it may be taken for granted that the deliberate changing of a work of art is to be condoned only on extraordinary grounds. And the only valid ground for translating the text of any vocal music is increased intelligibility, implying greater educational possibilities.

It would be folly to argue that there is no real difference between an original Italian, French or German text and an English translation. No matter how careful and resourceful the translator, the gulf between the two is still impassable. And when the words of a Romanic language have to be reproduced in a Germanic, as in

translating from Italian or French into German or English, the gulf is all the greater.

In representing either the linguistic subtleties of the Romanic languages or the broad vowel sounds of the Teutonic, English suffers from peculiar limitations. Our vocabulary, to be sure, is very large, and seems to contain a word or phrase for every possible thought. But a great part of these resources cannot be utilized in a fixed musical setting because of the rigidity of the English accent. In French, where there is rarely any marked accentuation, and in Italian or German, where every letter and every syllable is regularly given its full phonetic value, it is a comparatively easy matter to achieve correct musical declamation, i. e. the exact correspondence of the musical accent with that of the spoken word. But in English a word rarely has more than one syllable which may safely receive a decided musical accent. And there are many words, particularly monosyllables, which are utterly incapable of sustaining any musical accent whatever.

Proceeding from the mere rhythm to the general sound and the mental effect of words, the limitations of the English language are still found to be great. It is significant that we make a very clear distinction between "commonplace" and "poetical" words. Many a word is barred from English poetry as being too "prosaic." In translating an operatic libretto, "poetical" words and phrases have to be substituted for the everyday language of the original.

"But," objects the propagandist of "opera in English," "if our literal translations of certain passages sound crude and banal, does not the original have exactly the same effect on those who are familiar with the language?"

The answer to this question is to be found in European poetry. There the distinction between the poetical and the commonplace is never clearly defined. The Latin imagination is able to supply what the spoken or written word merely suggests, and the crudest realism is easily invested with romance. The greatest poems are often expressed in the simplest words. So the foreigner, listening to operatic banalities which would make the literal Anglo-Saxon shudder, glorifies them by the power of his imagination. For him there is no sudden leap from the sublime to the ridiculous.

But the Anglo-Saxon imagination, if it exists at all, is self-conscious and analytical. It finds it difficult to build up an illusion, and even when it succeeds there is constant danger of a sudden collapse. That is why it insists upon "poetical" terms in its operatic translations, placing one more limitation upon the already harassed English language.

Finally must be considered the various effects of sound in the foreign languages whose exact imitation is practically impossible. Not only the many differences in the pronunciation of both vowels and consonants, but also the varieties of rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, etc., must be taken into account. Wagner is especially fond of onomatopoeia, frequently using German words whose actual sound suggests their meaning. Alliteration is never easy to imitate. As for rhyme, the European fondness for combinations of two or more syllables has been the bugbear of many a translator, for, aside from the present participle and words with such suffixes as -tion, there is a poverty of double rhymes in the English language.

Admitting, then, that no English translation, however good, can possibly hope to equal the original, the whole problem becomes merely a question of how much artistic inferiority may be overlooked for the sake of increased intelligibility. And this question, in all fairness, must be applied to each vocal composition separately; its answer will depend largely on the skill of the translator. It may be interesting, therefore, to examine in detail the problems with which one is confronted in attempting to fit an English version of a foreign text to a preconceived musical setting.

Correct declamation is the first duty of the translator. There is no excuse for the slightest flaw in accents. That some great song-writers have erred in this respect, even in their original settings, has nothing to do with the case. The song-writer sets his text according to his own conception of its metre and accent. But the translator has before him a series of definite rhythmical combinations, to which the natural accents of his English words must be fitted exactly.

It is unnecessary to enter into the details of faulty accentuation that are to be found in published translations. Hundreds of examples could be pointed out, merely by running through a few collections of songs and half a dozen operatic scores. The mistakes include not only the emphasizing of non-accented syllables, but the placing of sustained and important notes upon such trifling words as the definite and indefinite articles, monosyllabic conjunctions, prepositions, etc. The writer has yet to see or hear an operatic English translation that is not full of false accents.

Almost as important as the purely mechanical problem of declamation is that of dramatic emphasis. Here the insight of the translator into the intentions of the composer is an important factor. He must constantly ask himself why certain words are peculiarly suited to the musical expression that has been given them, and

he must try to produce similar if not identical combinations in his translation.

An illustration will make this point clear. In Schumann's "Widmung," the second line of the poem is "Du meine Wonn', o du mein Schmerz." The composer has beautifully expressed the meaning of the line by rising to a joyous note on the word "Wonn'," and then descending in regular progression to a contrasting low note on "Schmerz." The meaning of the two sustained tones in the musical phrase (coming on "Wonn'" and "Schmerz") is unmistakable. The same effect can be procured in translation only by giving the first note a word expressing joy and the second a sharply contrasting word indicating grief, pain, or sorrow. Yet at least two translators have rendered the line, "Thou all my joy and sorrow *art*." The flat, meaningless verb "art," in other words, is expected to fit the poignant note which Schumann has given to the dramatic German word "Schmerz"!

Another example of lack of insight on the part of a translator is to be found in Schumann's "Die Beiden Grenadiere." The line "Sie liessen die Köpfe hangen," is dramatically expressed by a series of descending tones, clearly suggesting the drooping heads of the dispirited grenadiers. But this effect is entirely lost in the version "Their hearts were depressed and aching." That the line is in no sense a literal translation makes little difference. (Literalness is one of the last things to be considered in translating to music.) But to miss the entire dramatic effect of a line, to give no hint of the hanging of heads, when both the German text and the music definitely express this thought, is inexcusable.

In one of the first lines of Schubert's "Wanderer" are the words "Es braust das Meer," whose meaning is dramatically suggested by the music. One translator gives as his version of the phrase, "The ocean foam"! Here is no hint of the force of "brausen," a very expressive German verb.

In his famous setting of the "Erlkönig," Schubert makes use of a number of dramatic devices which the careful translator must imitate if possible. The terror-stricken cry of the child, for instance, is intensified in the phrase "Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?" by the position and sound of the word "nicht." But this phrase has been translated, "Seest, father, thou the Erlking, *alas!*" A pitiful subterfuge, even supposing that an actual child ever could have used such an exclamation as "*alas!*"

When the music, as is often the case, gives a direct imitation of the sense of the words, then the translator's version must be even more carefully chosen. Two examples will suffice. Debussy,

in the song "C'est l'extase langoureuse," gives a direct imitation of the rolling sound of pebbles under water, in setting the phrase "Le roulis sourd des cailloux." The translation, "Where waves on stormy shores die," scarcely makes the point clear.

For a second example we may turn again to Schumann's "Grenadiers." The line "Viel' Schwerter klirren und blitzen" contains two strongly onomatopoeic words ("klirren" and "blitzen") which the composer has set to music directly imitating the clashing and flashing of swords. One translator gives the line as "And swords clash and muskets rattle," a version which commits nearly every possible sin against musical translation. The declamation is bad, with the important word "clash" actually on an unaccented note, while the second syllable of "muskets" is awkwardly divided, and the unvocalic "le" of "rattle" comes on a fairly sustained tone. The translation is not only far from literal but introduces the entirely extraneous idea of "muskets." But worst of all, it absolutely misses the dramatic imitation of the music on those splendid words "klirren" and "blitzen," and therefore completely frustrates the genius of the composer. Another version, "While swords with clash are descending," offers little in the way of improvement, the final word, in particular, being utterly unworthy of the original.

Thus far there have been mentioned only the demands which may fairly be made of the translator by the composer. But the singer must also be considered, at least in so far as he was considered in the original setting. Translators should make it a rule to reproduce as far as possible the important vowel sounds of the original text. For the convenience of the singer is generally regarded by the conscientious composer who writes with the final effect of the song in mind. A soft high note, for example, may be set to an *ee* sound, making a smooth head-tone an easy matter. On the other hand, if a full chest-tone is desired the average singer would much prefer an *ah* or an *ay*. In general the rule for the translator may be summed up in the words "Imitate the sounds of the original text as far as possible, so that the translation may 'sing' like the original song."

But the poet also has his rights, and the most conscientious translators try as a rule to imitate also the original schemes of rhyme and metre. This is often so difficult that it can be accomplished only by the sacrifice of sense, accent, or dramatic emphasis. If the translator has to choose between these evils, it is far better for him to sacrifice the original verse-form than any of the features directly affecting the musical setting. Often a metrical scheme

cannot be exactly reproduced, owing to the liberties taken by the composer and the difference between English and foreign accents. When rhymes are emphasized by the music, the translator can hardly afford to omit them. But usually a modification is permissible, as, for instance, in the four-line stanzas with alternating rhymes (very common in French songs) where a rhyming of the second and fourth lines is quite sufficient in translation. The ideal translator, of course, would be expected to make his version not only "sing" like the original song but also "read" like the original poem.

Last of all comes the question of the actual meaning of the text. The average observer, to whom a translator is primarily a linguist, may argue that this question should stand first instead of last. To be sure, it is taken for granted that every translation will reproduce in some fashion the meaning of the original. But in respect to the accuracy of details, translating to music is a very different matter from translating in general. The distinction becomes clear when one reflects on the obvious difference between a "reading translation," for program purposes only, and a version that is intended to be sung. In the former, every detail of idiom, metaphor, poetical word-play, etc., should be reproduced, while in the latter the demands of the musical setting must be supreme in importance.

In general it is safe to say that a literal, word-for-word translation is never possible or even desirable. The real meaning of a French or German phrase may often be entirely obscured by a literal translation. The translator should read the original poem until he is thoroughly imbued with its spirit and general significance, after which he may rewrite the entire text in his own words, concentrating his mind upon the more important matters noted above.

This has generally been the most satisfactory method of procedure. Beginning with a clear conception of the general thought to be expressed, the careful workman first makes sure of the vital points of accent and dramatic emphasis, gradually introducing also the chief vowel-sounds and the leading features of the original rhyme-scheme. If he is able to include so much, he is extremely fortunate and may well be satisfied even if not a single word or phrase has been translated literally. The latter possibility depends entirely upon the nature of the original text and the language in which it is written. It is much easier to make an English translation from the closely related German, for example, than from the French or Italian languages.

The ideal musical translator is not merely a linguist, but a poet and a musician as well. If all these qualities are not to be found in one man, it would be better for several individuals to collaborate. This, in fact, is now very often done. The late Henry Grafton Chapman, whose translations are remarkable for their poetic touch and their thorough sympathy with the spirit of the author, never hesitated to consult with singers and composers in order to make his work acceptable in its musical as well as its literary quality.

If a poet could find the inspiration for a sonnet in reading Chapman's translation of Homer, why should not the modern Anglicizer of vocal music be ambitious for the future verdict "He was a great interpreter"? Perhaps if the thoughtless propagandists of "singing in English" and the careless critics of translations in general realized the stupendous difficulties faced by the translator of even the simplest song, they would be more inclined to treat with respect and consideration a work worthy of the most inspired poet-musician, instead of relegating it to the underworld of grubbing hacks and soulless versifiers.